


# Route 53 study goes forward, despite project's demotion

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Mary Wisniewski

 The Illinois Tollway is going ahead with a \$25 million environmental study of a plan to extend state Route 53, even though the project is no longer designated a local priority.

Last month, the region's planning agency knocked the controversial, long-debated proposal to extend Route 53 from Cook County into Lake County off its priority list. This means it is no longer eligible for federal funds.

But the environmental study can still go forward, say officials from the Federal Highway Administration and the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, or CMAP. Tollway Chairman Bob Schillerstrom said the study is in its initial stage and will help officials determine whether a new toll road is needed in the growing Lake, northern Cook and eastern McHenry County region.

"There are a lot of opinions on it, and that's what we're investigating at this point," Schillerstrom said. The Tollway approved the study last year.

CMAP spokesman Tom Garritano said that the study can help "further refine the project." He said CMAP could put the project back on its priority list at a later time.

Environmental lawyer Howard Learner said that the study is a waste of public money.

"It's a pointless exercise," said Learner, executive director of the Environmental Law and Policy Center, a nonprofit advocacy group. Learner said that if a project is not on CMAP's priority list, the Federal Highway Administration cannot finalize the study and the project cannot be built. He called the Route 53 plan a "fiscal boondoggle."

The study is being conducted by two engineering firms: Colorado-based CH2M Hill and Chicago-based Knight E/A.

Debated since the 1960s, the proposed Route 53 extension would create a new T-shaped tollway, with 53 making up the north-south portion and a widened Illinois Route 120 creating the top east-west portion. The extension would run from Arlington Heights to Grayslake.

Supporters include construction companies, which say the project would bring jobs and relieve congestion. Environmental groups and some suburban officials oppose the plan, noting its projected \$2.65 billion cost and potential negative impact on wetlands.

Former Tollway Director Bill Morris, of Grayslake, called the agency "irresponsible" for spending millions of dollars on yet another environmental study of the Route 53 plan — there already have been three.

"They're spending that money as if it was you or I going to a movie and deciding we want popcorn," Morris said.

## Transportation song quiz

Last week's song tells of a toll operator who got tricked. The song is "Rock Island Line." Steve Rousey, of San Tan Valley, Ariz., was first with the right answer.

GPS is making us forget the usefulness of paper road maps. In this song, one is used as a napkin. What's the song, and who sang it? The first person with the right answer gets a Tribune bookmark, and glory.

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